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Narratives of Mexican American Women: Emergent Identities of the Second Generation

Book Review

[ALEX SORIANO]

“[Mexican American women] live in a second-generation borderland of identity in which boundaries are fluid, highly nuanced, and always emergent.”¹

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identity studies of immigrant populations abound in academia. In *Narratives of Mexican American Women*, Alma García approaches this topic in a variety of unique ways. One of the way she does this is by focusing on a very specific population: second-generation Mexican American women in college. Focusing on a specific ethnic group—Mexicans—instead of Hispanics or Latinas/os adds validity to the research. Latinx/Hispanic is an umbrella term that can ignore significant differences between people from different Latin American and Spanish-speaking countries. The intersecting identities of the women in the book are intricately woven into an analytic fabric of nationality, ethnicity, immigrant generation, gender, and class. García effectively portrays the struggle associated with occupying a multiplicity of complex identities, and how that leads to a process of constant recreation and reinvention of the personal meanings attached to those identities.

García also uses the powerful methodology of personal narratives in her study of Mexican American women. Personal narrative interviews, when utilized by minority populations, can be called counterstories because they give underrepresented communities a voice to defy the dominant narrative that permeates academia. Counterstories are also a powerful way to tell the unique stories of internal battles and intersecting identities—as is the case in García’s research—which are often difficult to document through objective research instruments. García established rapport with her study

¹ Alma M. García, *Narratives of Mexican American Women: Emergent Identities of the Second Generation* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004), 70.

participants and consequently induced organic, heart-felt responses, contributing to the book's ability to provide readers with an inside look into the lives of second-generation women.

Identity can be a difficult subject to study, and even define, but García does an exceptional job at helping her readers understand the complex identity of the population in question. The main research objective is to explore ethnic identity in second-generation Mexican women. Participants are asked to tell their stories of living in America, adapting to the culture, fitting in, and defining themselves. To the women García interviewed, identity is a labored process of frequent contestations and navigations between the dominant white American culture and their own marginal identities. Identity is fluid, dynamic and perpetually in flux. Mexican American women “(re)create,” “(re)invent,” and “(re)imagine” themselves as they combine elements from their parents' identities, Mexico, US society, their communities, and their own experiences into their identities. García also found that although the second-generation women were born and raised in the US, their Mexican ethnic identities are very salient. The persistence of a foreign Mexican culture is partially to blame for their identity struggles; it leads to the creation of a unique limbo ethnic identity between being Mexican and being American.

The struggle of in-betweenness is reflected in a popular phrase used by Latin Americans to describe their ethnic identities: *ni de aqui ni de alla* (not from here or there). This phrase is often used as a response to the questions “what are you?” or “but besides American, where are you really from?” asked to people of distinct cultural backgrounds. I must also add that there is a racialized component to these questions because it is usually inflicted on people who fail to fit standard phenotypical appearances. This question may evoke apprehension from Latinx individuals or require intense and deep self-examination to find a concrete response. The answer of ethnic identification not only creates dissonance due to potential rejection from foreign countries over too much Americanization, but also rejection from America due to phenotypical, cultural, language, or occupational difference from the mainstream. Still, the answer may change contextually depending on whether one is surrounded by in-group members (other Mexicans), or out-group members (non-Mexicans). The basis for the problem of having a nuanced identity is studied in *Narratives of Mexican American Women*.

The stories of the women in the book begin with the stories of their parents. The Mexican American women in the study's ethnic identities are largely informed by their parents' ethnic identification; they carry the anguish, battles, dreams, memories, and immigrant stories of their parents as a part of their own ethnic identity. Mexican immigrant parents are attached to the culture of the countries they grew up in and raise their children with the nostalgic renditions of their home countries they held on

to over time. They keep Mexico alive through stories and memories, rituals, distribution of popular culture symbols, religion, and visits to Mexico. Thus, the participants' attachments to Mexico are mostly symbolic because they are passed on to them by their parents. What's also passed on is parents' aspirations for success, education, and a better future. The daughters can't help but feel a connection to their parents' culture. Yet they simultaneously carry an allegiance to America, resulting in a blended Mexican-American ethnic identification.

The Mexican American women in this study specifically identify with their mom's identities because they also internalize their mothers' confrontation with gender roles. Mexican immigrant mothers challenge traditional gender roles because of lifestyle difference in the US, and the confrontation process—which is arduous and often times resisted by the family patriarch—becomes a part of the women's ethnic identities. Mexican American women in the study also experience a personal conflict with patriarchal gender norms at home and liberal feminism at their universities. Conflicts at home were often with their fathers.

The underlying purpose of the book is to call attention to educational reform. Mexican American women are underrepresented in higher education, partially due to a lack of navigational capital (knowledge of how to navigate college and university) and conflicting messages received about themselves from educational institutions. In the book, college is a setting where Mexican American women had to, again, redefine themselves and where they questioned their identity. The university incorporated understandings of social power dynamics into the women's identities. García calls for improvements to the educational setting for Mexican American women as the educational gap still exists today. However, identity struggles and the university setting, as portrayed in the book, originally published in 2003, must be reexamined due large sociopolitical landscape transformations in the US, including the effects of the 2016 election. It would be interesting to replicate this study in the present day.

García portrays the internal struggles of college-aged Mexican women in a very succinct and comprehensible way. She penetrates the inside world of these women in a way that outsiders can understand but that also resonates with insiders who identify personally with the stories told. It must be stated that the experiences of the women in the book are not reflective of all second-generation Mexican American woman in university from working class backgrounds. Furthermore, although slightly outdated (three-year study conducted between 1997 and 1999) many will find that they still identify with the topics, themes and stories discussed in the book, appropriately branding it a classic. And those who do identify with the content will find this book cathartic.